

Purple Turtle Speaks and Breaks

What is hip hop? What does it mean to be Indigenous? Loosely answered, hip hop is rooted in the Black communities on southern Turtle Island (USA). It encompasses graffiti, break dancing, MCing and DJing. Indigenous means original people of the land. “Indigenous Hip Hop” is a fusion and birth of a new generation of Native youth communities and lifestyle. Indigenous people have always experienced and used their environment towards the end of expressing our humanity and this perception only became stronger and more ‘evident’ after colonization. In the ability to document through common language (English) in the written form, and now through new media, we are seeing an immense surge of the Indigenous experience.

This genre, the hip hop subculture that is being engaged by Native people today, is one of the strongest and most valued and respected streams of human consciousness. What are we doing with this information? How are Indigenous people engaging in this culture? How is it helpful and how is it harmful? In the lyrics of Indigenous hip hop today you can hear some of the most valuable accounts in our human history and evolution and de-evolution. Through the visual work and documentation of Indigenous hip hop artists, the amalgamation of our time on earth can be seen. This is very important.

Where can Indigenous expression be seen? Or perhaps a better question is where can it NOT be seen? Mainstream television, blockbuster films, radio stations, government structure and even buildings themselves. The de-saturation of Indigenous expression is a sign of colonization. For some people a pencil and paper are the only tools seen as available to document the expression of oneself. The common denominator is spoken word. Thus, Indigenous hip hop is widely accessible and crosses over cultural barriers. What are they saying? What are they doing, and how is this impacting the world community? In the chorus of Ron Harris’ (aka Ostwelve), song *Baphela Bantu BMedicine*, he writes, “Be a medicine to yourself in a world that’s becoming poisonous, be a light in your own darkness in the silence to the noisiness...” After a trip to Africa he returned with stories of community organizations that aim to support African youth in the slums in need of basic services and using hip hop as an outreach tool. Living conditions can be seen as comparable to those on present-day reservations, and many youth have turned to hip hop as a primary source of expression. The words that come through are testimony to those living conditions and document the layman’s life experience there plainly for us to hear uncensored.

“Cards are definitely stacked against us, house rules in this yard that fenced us, how cruel are these guards that sensed us trying to escape culturally condensed us...” At the end of Ostwelve’s song we hear a

spoken address, “Yo from Africa to the Americas to the Asias...Baphela Bantu: People Are Dying, you have to take it in your own hands to be a medicine to your people, not a venom, silence the noise within you..Baphela Bantu – The People Are Dying.” Ostwelve is a young Native artist who has first hand experience travelling to a third world country and who returned to share his message with a very clear audience, which is the collective ‘we’ as Native people.

I found a lot of the artists sing directly to ‘their people’. Christie Lee Charles, aka Miss Christie Lee, sings in the Musqueam language. “These words I have to say ain’t like anything you ever heard in your day, straight spittin’ my ways, this is how I play...you and me be living in a time that they was living for...believe it or not we the future of history so stop living your life like it was a mystery...” When she says ‘we’, ‘you’ and ‘your’, I know that she is speaking directly to me as a Native person. A lot of these artists steer clear of the mainstream and feel quite comfortable in their own communities. Native community events, Pow Wows and Aboriginal cabarets welcome hip hop artists and see the worth in including them. One of my first experiences with Native hip hop was seen at a Tribal Wizdom show back in the early 90s. Kinnie Starr was a huge influence to me as an artist and to many Native youth artists, then and now.

This is where I was introduced to Indigenous hip hop and even dabbled in the art myself. Spoken word was something that I was really comfortable with, coming from a nation that practices oral traditions. I, like my fellow Native youth at the time, was drawn to the familiarity of the ‘plight’ of the poor Black communities who were singing, dancing and painting their way out of the system. There was a commonality that was seen in this rebellious culture. Not only did it come in the form of rap music and graffiti, but also in skate–boarding culture as these were intrinsically linked and were crossing class borders as well as race borders. At these gatherings that were popping up all around the city and during the time that the Native Youth Movement opened a Vancouver Chapter, *Redwire Magazine* began publishing, and that’s when I met a lot of budding artists. Derek Edenshaw aka Manik1derful, a now well–known MC, came on the scene and with him brought together a diverse urban hip hop community with ‘us’, the Native youth political activists in NYM. This was a perfect marriage as youth were so integrated with Black culture already through mass media. Here was a young person who could act as a catalyst, a bridge and an MC vocalizing and localizing ‘our scene’ and what we were facing and dealing with.

Hip hop was influencing these new artists and permeating their visual work as well, which can be seen quite clearly in the work of Andrew Dexel, a noteworthy emerging painter who began as a graffiti artist, and

Corey Bulpitt, an established young Haida carver who now works with youth on Northwest Coast style graffiti murals. Dexel fuses North West Coast formline with graffiti in a clear and present way, gaining him new audiences wherever he exhibits. These trails blazers may not be 'experts' of their field, whether it is painting, rapping, graffiti or hip hop dancing, but it is a new genre very unique to our era, which in itself is worth talking about. These groupings, subcultures, crews or whatever you want to call them, are taken quite seriously by their peers. They are often revered and shown respect for the language they are creating and the cultural signifiers that contribute to the enrichment and meaning that they build on our cultural landscapes.

Naturally, we now see the results of this in the forms of social constructs, rules, laws – spoken and unspoken language, movement and the impending changes. The influence of pop culture and mainstream hip hop were described to me once as a danger. At a public gathering, I spoke about the importance of hip hop culture to youth and the importance of them using it as an uncensored tool for expression. A man who identified himself as an ex-con warned me of the danger of gangster rap and how people are using it to spread threats and push their agenda on the youth to include gang related 'beefing' or internal fighting amongst one another. I also see the idea of Conscious hip hop itself as being in danger of mainstream hip hop and falling prey to the ignorant mindsets of a few.

I think that a larger conversation needs to take place to really get to the root of what I am talking about here. We are now seeing on a grand scale, also due to the growing number of young Indigenous people coming of age, a massive documentation process and participation in mainstream culture. They are talking about their standards of living, their communities, their hopes and fears, and we need to listen. We need to open our eyes and really see what they are presenting and not just as a last resort to avoid any great catastrophes: we need to use it as a first resort for guidance in our roles as adults and guardians. Just as in any massive form of communication, there are going to be sentimental statements made, broad sweeping fears expressed and lots of 'documentation' to examine, but we should really consider ourselves lucky. Native youth, Native people, Indigenous people, hip hop people are presenting ideas, making connections, drawing conclusions and asking important questions. If we use this as a basis of discussion, we can see that they've taken a lot of guesswork out of the equation and what we are left with is the essence of where they are at, exactly. As adults, educators, helpers, historians and just plain human beings we need to honour this subculture as much as we honour our own families. In doing this, we honour ourselves, our people and our humanity.